**How Political Parties Began**

**CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION  
*Bill of Rights in Action*FALL 2008 (Volume 24, No. 2)**

**At first, our nation’s founders—including Hamilton, Jefferson, and others—believed political parties were evil and a threat to the new nation. But these early American leaders soon began to invent a new and essential role for political parties in a democracy.**

When the Constitution was written in 1787, the founders thought of political parties as "factions," acting only for their own selfish interests rather than the public good. The founders saw instances in history when factions resorted to assassination and civil war if they failed to get their way.

The writers of the Constitution believed that political parties would play no formal role in the new government. The Constitution made no mention of them.

Even in electing the president, the founders assumed the absence of political parties. The Constitution established an Electoral College, which called for a small number of electors—elected or appointed in the states— to meet, deliberate, and choose the best person for president. The runner-up automatically would become the vice president.

**Hamilton vs. Jefferson**

In 1788, George Washington won a large majority of electoral votes and became the nation’s first president. John Adams, who won the second highest number of electoral votes for president, became vice president.

Both Washington and Adams had supported the ratification of the Constitution, as had almost all other prominent leaders such as Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. When Washington appointed his Cabinet, he included Hamilton as secretary of the treasury and Jefferson as secretary of state. These two Cabinet members disagreed on many issues.

Hamilton strongly believed that for the new nation to succeed, it had to gain the confidence of potential investors—both American and foreign. The new nation needed them, Hamilton argued, to invest in private enterprises and make loans to the government for projects like roads, harbors, and canals. To gain the confidence of investors, Hamilton promoted a plan, supported by Washington, for the federal government to pay off all Revolutionary War debt incurred by the federal government and the states.

Hamilton proposed a bold economic plan to raise revenue to retire these debts. He asked Congress to approve excise taxes on products like whiskey made in the United States. He also proposed creating a Bank of the United States to centralize federal government finances.

Almost immediately, Jefferson in Washington’s Cabinet and James Madison in Congress objected to Hamilton’s economic program. They complained that greedy speculators had bought up at deep discounts most of the war bonds that patriotic Americans had originally purchased to fund the Revolutionary War. They argued that the speculators would make tremendous profits if they received face value for the bonds, as Hamilton proposed.

Jefferson and Madison also objected to the excise taxes because these taxes mainly burdened small farmers and city workers. Hamilton replied that wealthy Americans already carried a heavy tax burden and that it was time for the common people to pay their share. Jefferson and Madison also opposed a national bank that, they said, would give too much power to the federal government.

As differences emerged between supporters of Hamilton and Jefferson, many began referring to Hamilton and his allies in the Cabinet and Congress as the Federalist Party. Jefferson claimed Federalist policies mainly benefitted the "opulent" classes while he and his supporters represented "the mass of the people."

In foreign affairs, the Federalists wanted a strong trade relationship with Britain. Washington sent John Jay to Britain in 1794 to negotiate an end to its interference with American merchant ships and prevent another war with it. Hamilton was satisfied with the Jay Treaty and pushed for Senate ratification. Jefferson and his followers condemned the treaty as too favorable to the British.

Jefferson and his supporters favored a closer relationship with Britain’s rival, France. The French had helped the Americans win the Revolutionary War. During Washington’s presidency, the French Revolution erupted. Revolutionaries executed King Louis XVI and declared a French republic. The new French republic’s motto was "Liberty, equality, fraternity."

Unlike the American Revolution, the one in France upended French society. The republic confiscated the land of the aristocrats and hunted them down. In 1793, a "reign of terror" led to the execution of thousands of people condemned as disloyal to the republic.

This new republic horrified the Federalists, who feared mob rule, lawlessness, and the confiscation of property. Many of Jefferson’s followers, however, cheered the French republicans for carrying forward the ideals of equality that he had espoused in the American Declaration of Independence.

American sentiment increased for revolutionary France when it declared war against Britain in 1793. Many of Jefferson’s followers wanted to enter this war on the side of France. Many Federalists called for aiding the British. But Hamilton persuaded Washington to adopt a policy of neutrality. In a rare moment of agreement with Hamilton, Jefferson supported this policy.

When Washington’s second term began, Jefferson decided to leave the Cabinet. He deeply opposed most of Hamilton’s Federalist Party policies. Jefferson believed the Federalists were attempting to establish an all-powerful federal government, one that would soon become a monarchy.

Jefferson resigned and began working with Madison to organize opposition to the Federalist Party within Congress. The Federalists referred to this opposition as the Democratic-Republican Party, trying to link it with the extremism of the French Revolution. Soon, however, those opposing Hamilton and the Federalist Party began to call themselves Jeffersonian Republicans, or simply Republicans.

**Federalists vs. Republicans**

At the end of his second term, Washington announced he would not run again for president. The bitter rivalry that had developed between the Federalists and Republicans deeply disturbed Washington. In his Farewell Address, he warned that parties were likely "to become potent engines by which . . . unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government."

Washington’s warning did not sway many. The presidential election of 1796, the first without Washington as a candidate, saw candidates backed by the Federalist and Republican parties. The Federalists favored John Adams and the Republicans backed Thomas Jefferson.

Neither Adams nor Jefferson actively campaigned. They remained at home while their supporters wrote letters and newspaper articles promoting their candidate. Adams won the presidency with 71 of the 139 Electoral College votes, one more than the required majority. Jefferson with 68 electoral votes came in second to become vice president. Thus the new administration had a Federalist president and Republican vice president.

Adams continued Washington’s pro-British trade policies. In retaliation, France began to attack American merchant ships. The attacks enraged the American public and prompted Adams to threaten war against France. He also proposed increasing taxes to create a navy and expand the standing (permanent) federal army. Jefferson and the Republican Party were alarmed at the rush to war and opposed the idea of building up the military. They viewed a large military as a threat to the power of the states.

As war loomed, the Federalists claimed that French spies and Americans who insulted federal officials were undermining the security of the nation at home. In 1798, Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts. These laws outlawed any malicious criticism of the president or other federal officials. In a series of sensational trials, Federalist judges and juries convicted about a dozen Republican writers and newspaper editors, mainly for defaming President Adams. Jefferson condemned these prosecutions and charged the Federalists with trying to destroy the Republican Party.

Since the Federalists controlled Congress, Adams got his navy and bigger army. But he eventually relied on diplomacy to avoid war with France, which angered many of his fellow Federalists who wanted to take a tougher stand against the French.

**The Struggle for Power in 1800**

In 1800**,** the Federalists again chose John Adams to run for president with Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, a Hamilton loyalist from South Carolina, as their candidate for vice president. The Republicans nominated Thomas Jefferson for president and Aaron Burr, Hamilton’s chief political opponent in New York, for vice president.

Campaign tactics radically changed in this election. Adams embarked on a speechmaking tour, campaigning on his record and promoting himself as a political moderate. Jefferson remained at home but wrote numerous letters to his supporters. He also distributed a statement of principles, perhaps the first party platform. Jefferson’s principles called for restoring civil liberties, curbing the growth of federal power, and protecting states’ rights.

Both parties resorted to political attacks and smears, perhaps making this one of the dirtiest presidential elections in U.S. history. Republican partisans railed at Adams as a monarchist who wanted to enslave the people. The Federalists called Jefferson a political radical and atheist.

Backstabbing occurred within both parties. Hamilton despised Adams and openly schemed to manipulate the Federalist electoral vote for president in favor of Pinckney, who was supposed to be running for vice president. This divided the Federalist Party between Adams and Hamilton factions. On the Republican side, Aaron Burr, running for vice president, secretly plotted to become president in the event of an electoral vote tie between Jefferson and himself.

By 1800, both parties were maneuvering to control the selection of those who voted in the Electoral College. This small group of electors, not the popular vote, decided who became president. Each state’s electoral vote equaled the number of representatives and senators it had in Congress.

In most states, the legislature appointed the electors. Whichever party held the majority in the state legislature was able to control all the state’s electoral votes. Some states permitted the voters in each of its congressional districts to choose between lists of Federalist or Republican electors. A few other states selected their electors by a statewide election with the winning party taking all the electoral votes (the method most states use today).

In the Electoral College, each elector cast two votes for two separate candidates for president. The candidate with the most votes was elected president. The runner-up became vice president. Adams and Pinckney actually received 65 electoral votes each. But by pre-arrangement, one Federalist elector did not vote for Pinckney, giving Adams a one-vote lead for president. Jefferson and Burr, however, ended up with 73 electoral votes each. Burr was not willing to drop one of his electoral votes. Thus two Republicans tied for president.

The tie in the Electoral College threw the election for president into the House of Representatives where each of the 16 states got one vote. In the first ballot, Jefferson won eight states to Burr’s six. Two states could not vote because their congressional delegations split equally. But Jefferson needed a majority, nine states, to win the presidency. The House voted 34 more times with the same result.

Reluctantly, Hamilton lobbied fellow Federalists to vote for Jefferson. Hamilton distrusted Burr even more than he did Jefferson. Finally, on the 36th ballot, Jefferson won the presidency with 10 states. Burr came in second with four and became vice president.

The Federalist Party handed over the government to Jefferson and the Republicans. The ruling party had peacefully given up power as the result of a democratic election. This is today a major test for any nation aspiring to be a democracy.

Since they had given up power under the rules of the Constitution, the Federalists became an opposition party. This, too, was significant. Until then, those in power, even in England, typically viewed those who organized to oppose them as disloyal to the country. Members of the British Parliament did divide themselves into "Tories" and "Whigs." But both were loose coalitions of aristocrats within the Parliament who often gathered around a prominent leader. They were little more than shifting groups who managed to put together enough votes at different times to form a new government. The idea of a well-organized "loyal opposition" party to check the power of the party in control of the government did not emerge in England until the 1820s. Thus the election of 1800 produced a new positive role for a political party that was out of power. It became the loyal opposition, opposing the ruling party while still remaining loyal to the Constitution and nation.

In 1804, the states ratified the 12th Amendment, which required electors of the Electoral College to vote separately for president and vice president rather than for the two best candidates for president. From then on, parties nominated candidates to run specifically for president or vice president. In effect, this amendment recognized the permanent role of political parties in American government.

**A One- or Two-Party System?**

Jefferson proved to be less radical than the Federalists had claimed. He even continued some of Hamilton’s economic policies. The Republican Party gained many new supporters as the right to vote in most states expanded to include all adult white males.

In 1804, Jefferson was re-elected by winning the electoral votes of all but two states. The Republicans also held a solid majority in Congress. In the next presidential election, James Madison, Jefferson’s close Republican ally, won and was re-elected four years later.

The Federalist Party failed to appeal to many voters and began a long decline. Its guiding spirit, Hamilton, had died in a duel with Burr in 1804.

After Madison, Republican James Monroe won the presidency in 1816. He set out to eliminate the Federalist Party altogether. "The existence of [competing] parties is not necessary to free government," he declared.

Monroe advocated a "fusion policy" to unify all Americans within the Republican Party. In the election of 1820, the Federalist Party did not even nominate a candidate for president. Monroe was re-elected, winning every electoral vote except one.

When the next presidential election took place in 1824, no national party remained to oppose the Republican Party. But the Republicans had absorbed so many Americans with differing political viewpoints, including former Federalists, that the party threatened to split apart.

Some Republicans like Martin Van Buren of New York argued that his party should stick to its Jeffersonian principles and not try to include every political point of view. Thus, Van Buren opposed Monroe’s "fusion policy" and welcomed a loyal opposition party. He wrote that parties competing to rule "are inseparable from free governments."

In 1824, four Republicans ran for president. Andrew Jackson won more electoral votes than the runner-up, John Quincy Adams, but not a majority. Adams, a defector from his father’s Federalist Party, won the presidency by one vote in the House of Representatives.

During John Quincy Adams’ single term as president, the Republicans split into two parties. Andrew Jackson’s supporters adopted Jefferson’s original Democratic-Republican Party name. After Jackson’s election as president in 1828, this became the modern Democratic Party. The opposing National Republican Party mainly included conservatives who favored Hamilton’s political vision. In 1836, the National Republicans helped to form the Whig Party.

During the years before the Civil War, Democrats and Whigs both won presidential elections, thus firmly establishing a two-party system in American national politics. In 1854, the Whigs and dissenting Democrats formed the modern Republican Party that elected Abraham Lincoln president in 1860. Ever since, the Democrats and Republicans have shared the White House and Congress with little competition from other parties.

**Questions: Please answer the following questions in complete, detailed responses – on a separate sheet of paper.**

1. What is the significance of the presidential election of 1800?

2. James Monroe and Martin Van Buren held different views on what sort of political party system the United States should have. How did they differ? Do you agree with Monroe or Van Buren? Why?

3. Why do you think the writers of the Constitution provided for the election of the president by an Electoral College system rather than by popular vote? Do you think the Electoral College system should be changed, abolished, or remain as it is? Why?

**Two Visions for America**

The Federalist and Republican parties held two visions  
for America based on the thinking of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Hamilton and the Federalists**  **The People**  "The people are turbulent and changing, they seldom judge or determine right."  —Hamilton (1787)  **Government**  1. Strong federal government and president acting for the national interest.  2. Voting and holding elected office limited to those who own property.  3. Interpret the Constitution in a flexible way to enable the nation to grow.  4. Order, stability, and unity have priority over individual rights.  **Political Parties**  5. The party that rules should be controlled by the educated and wealthy elite.  **Economy**  6. A commercial and industrial economy is best for the growth and prosperity of the nation.  7. Tax certain American-made products like whiskey to broaden the tax burden to all Americans.  **Security and Foreign Policy**  8. Strong permanent army and navy to defend the homeland and free trade overseas.  9. Internal security laws are needed to prevent criticism and insults against the president and other elected leaders.  10. Friendly toward Britain and hostile toward revolutionary France, but neutral in European wars. | **Jefferson and the Republicans**  **The People**  "The will of the majority . . . is the only sure guardian of the rights of man."  —Jefferson (1790)  **Government**  1. Small federal government with strong states’ rights.  2. All white adult males should have the right to vote and hold office.  3. Interpret the Constitution according to the strict meaning of its wording.  4. Individual rights should have top priority.  **Political Parties**  5. The party that rules should be controlled by the common people.  **Economy**  6. An agricultural economy is best with most people owning small farms.  7. Collect taxes mainly from the business and large landowner classes.  **Security and Foreign Policy**  8. A permanent military may lead to a takeover by a strongman like Napoleon; rely on local and state militias for defense.  9. Internal security laws that interfere with freedom of speech and press are a threat to liberty.  10. Friendly toward revolutionary France and hostile toward Britain, but neutral in European wars. |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | |  | | --- | |  | |